CYCLES OF VIOLENCE: TO AFGHANISTAN AND BACK

Paul Rogers

Oxford Research Group
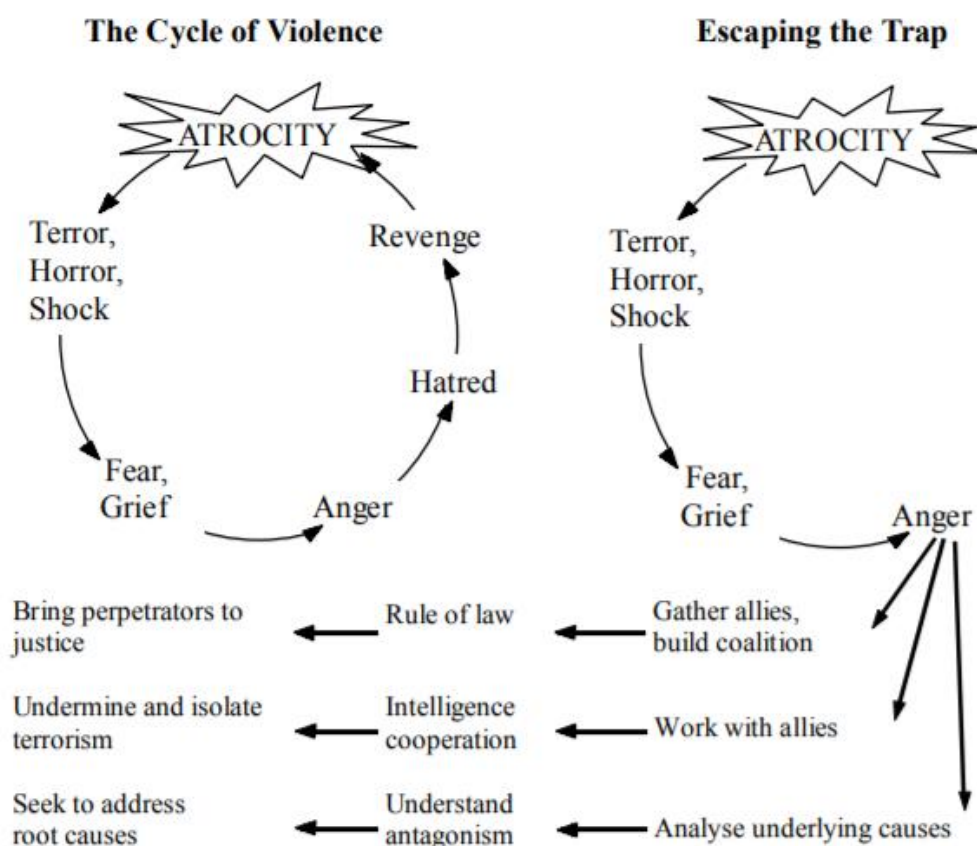*Sustainable Security Programme*

SUMMARY

As the United States seeks to end its 18-year war in Afghanistan through negotiations with the Taliban, this briefing revisits how Washington and the Western coalition have responded to the 9/11 attacks and stoked the cycle of violence that has empowered al-Qaida, Islamic State and other extreme, anti-Western groups.

Introduction

In October 2001, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Oxford Research Group published an [examination](#) of the likely outcomes of a vigorous military response by the United States. Unlike most analysts and commentators, Scilla Elworthy and I argued that a war against al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan was the wrong response and would most probably lead to a long-drawn-out conflict.

We included what we hoped was a useful schematic from Scilla on how the cycle of violence that characterised other armed conflicts might be broken and suggested three routes by which the justified anger felt by so many in the United States might be productively channelled to deal with the threat from al-Qaida. Regrettably, this was not the route taken.

The Cycle of Violence

ATROCITY

Terror, Horror, Shock

Revenge

Hatred

Fear, Grief

Anger

Bring perpetrators to justice ← Rule of law

Undermine and isolate terrorism ← Intelligence cooperation

Seek to address root causes ← Understand antagonism

Escaping the Trap

ATROCITY

Terror, Horror, Shock

Fear, Grief

Anger

Gather allies, build coalition ←

Work with allies ←

Analyse underlying causes ←

At the time, this approach, which was also argued by just a few other groups, received very little support and there was scarcely any coverage in the Western media until President Bush's January 2002 *State of the Union Address.* He used that occasion to extend the war to an "Axis of Evil" of Iraq, Iran and North Korea, "rogue states"(a Clinton-era concept) developing weapons of mass destruction while also supporting terrorism. The United States had the right to pre-empt such threats with this even extending to regime termination, a move which led to considerable public disquiet, especially in Western Europe.

The experience of the last 18 years has indeed been of long-drawn-out wars and violence stoked by hatred and thirst for revenge in the Middle East, South Asia and parts of Africa. The most recent development is what appears to be the re-establishment of the Islamic State movement (IS) with a multiplicity of activities also forming part of a more general increase in Islamist paramilitary movements.

This briefing aims to put the current circumstances in a longer-term context than usual, with an emphasis on explaining the reasons for the continuing support for IS and similar movements.

The Rebirth of IS

Recent briefings in this series have focused on elements of IS's evolution. In February, *Caliphate Interrupted: Towards A Stateless IS* assessed how the IS caliphate had been destroyed by an intense air war from mid-2014 to early 2018 involving 30,000 air operations and the use of over 100,000 missiles and precision-guided bombs that killed some 60,000 IS supporters and several thousand civilians.

The following month's briefing *After Baghouz: A Jihadi Archipelago* analysed the final stages of the war against the caliphate as Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces took control of the IS-held town of Baghouz in eastern Syria. It highlighted the large number of IS paramilitaries, up to 10,000 involved and with many avoiding capture, but also pointed to IS still being active by operating in numerous small cells rather than through direct territorial control. This enabled it to mount numerous attacks last year, with 3,670 attacks claimed, 79% of them in Iraq (48%) and Syria (31%). The briefing also pointed to operations linked to IS-affiliated groups in the Sahel region of the Sahara, Somalia and the Philippines.

The implications of this was that in spite of a unique yet scarcely reported use of intense "remote warfare" by the Western military coalition, Islamic State was already adapting to the changed environment both by reverting to guerrilla warfare and insurgency in Iraq and Syria and by an expansion of its links across two continents.

In the last few months this trend has continued and might even be said to have accelerated, with IS also able to establish new areas of distinct geographical control. In the Sahel, IS has strengthened its position in a number of states but most notably in north-east Nigeria, where the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP) has in places pushed Boko Haram to one side and has already established what amounts to a proto-state – brutal and controlling but perhaps more ordered than the prevailing chaos.

Even more relevant is how IS in Afghanistan, which it terms its Khorasan Province, has established a "proto-caliphate" in Nangahar, Nuristan, Kunar and Laghman provinces. These are in the northeast of the country, between Kabul and the Pakistan border, the mountains of Kunar being the main current focus. Unlike the more nationalistic Taliban, IS in Afghanistan sees the establishment of territorial control as a necessary step in resuming operations overseas against the "far enemy" of the West.

In spite of the many thousands of IS combatants killed in the air war, US government sources estimate the IS strength in Iraq and Syria alone at 18,000, that it has access to around $400 million in a number of safe locations and even has investments ranging from car sales and fish farming to cannabis production. This is all before we include the expansion well beyond Iraq and Syria.

Explanations

Oxford Research Group's original post-9/11 analysis argued that going to war with al-Qaida would prove fundamentally counter-productive because this was what the movement wanted. IS, al-Qaida and other jihadist movements see themselves as promoters of what they see as the "true" manifestation of Islam. For the extreme movements their vision is the truth, but this is in the perceived context of Islam under attack especially from a Crusader-Zionist coalition which they see as the real axis of evil.

Al-Qaida and more recent manifestations therefore visualise themselves as the true defenders of Islam which means that resisting any attack from this coalition is a core part of their purpose. Furthermore, this is made more potent by stemming from an eschatological dimension that the conflict transcends this earthly life. Ultimate and total victory is divinely assured but tactical setbacks are to be expected. It is therefore best to see the multiple suicide attacks in 9/11 partly as an expression to the wider Islamic world of the power and significance of al-Qaida.

It was also seen within the movement as the second phase of a war, the first being the successful eviction of the Soviets from Afghanistan by the Mujahidin and their al-Qaida allies. 9/11 would incite a strong US-led response which would lead to a long war in Afghanistan and a similar weakening effect on the United States. One superpower had been brought to its knees and a second would now surely follow.

While that vision was not fulfilled, the war has lasted 18 years, and Trump is now determined to negotiate a withdrawal. For the successors to al-Qaida such as IS the prospects now beckon for renewed influence and a base for further growth in Afghanistan even as IS and other groups increase their impact in northern Africa and across southern Asia.

Two further elements aid this deeply rooted if perverse vision. One is that the overall Western response over nearly two decades has been centred on the resolute use of force and score-settling with a range of opponents. This has resulted in hundreds of thousands of people killed, even more injured and some countries wrecked. Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and parts of Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen and Mali are but the best-known examples. Quite apart from the failure of this approach to triumph over IS, al-Qaida and others, it has left an appalling legacy of anger and a desire for revenge. To Western states it is a necessary war but to those on the receiving end it is yet one more example of the determination of the West to suppress a true and independent vision of Islam.

The second is that in many of the areas for potential growth, IS and similar movements find it all too easy to recruit from a huge transnational pool of younger people, especially

young men. They are bitter and deeply resentful at their lack of life chances and more readily succumb to a cultish promise of a different future, not just for this life but even for eternity. Much recent research has confirmed the motivation stemming from an actual or at least perceived marginalisation, even in relatively peaceful and prosperous societies such as Tunisia or Morocco.

This itself is often seen as a further manifestation of foreign control – including disadvantageous economic policies, the actions of some multinational corporations, and the suppression of opportunities to migrate to richer countries – even if greatly aided by local autocracies' domestic actions. Many of the latter, of course, have been bolstered economically, diplomatically and militarily through their "strategic partnerships" with Western states in the context of wars on terror. Afghanistan, Chad and Yemen (before its collapse in 2015) are all prime examples of this.

Conclusion

The persistence of IS, al-Qaida and related movements in the face of the repeated and extensive use of force, principally by Western states, points very strongly to the failure of the current approach and the critical need for new policies. These will stand much more chance of bringing some degree of stability if they recognise three elements.

The first is the world view from within the extreme movements of being under attack from the West. From their perspective, they are the defenders not the attackers and they are engaged in an eternal struggle.

The second is that the extensive wars over nearly two decades and the huge number of casualties will have a generations-long impact of anger and desire for revenge. This may nonetheless be exacerbated or ameliorated depending on what other policies are pursued.

Finally, support for extreme movements benefits consistently from a widespread transnational perception of marginalisation, both within local societies and in relation to the West.

Recognising all three elements is a necessary basis for rethinking the current failing policies, not least the need to focus on legal responses boosted by intelligence cooperation while countering the underlying causes of the violence.

Image credit: [Senior Airman Grovert Fuentes-Contreras/Wikimedia Commons.](#)

About the Author

Paul Rogers *is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in international security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '[Monthly Global Security Briefings'](#) are available from our website. His latest book Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins was published by I B Tauris in June 2016.*

Sustainable Security Programme
Oxford Research Group
The Green House
244-254 Cambridge Heath Road
London E2 9DA
org@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk
020 3559 6745